

Diego says he's holidaying

REUTERS, Bogota

Diego Maradona insisted that his visit to the Caribbean city of Cartagena was for nothing more than a holiday and asked to be left in peace on Wednesday.

Maradona, who spoke to reporters for the first time since he arrived a week ago, gave a 10-minute interview in front of the apartment block where he is staying.

He allowed himself to be photographed with some European tourists and his presence in the street caused a traffic jam in the chic neighbourhood.

"I've just come to say hello and respect your work," said the 44-year-old former Argentina captain, who has ballooned in weight and is scarcely recognisable from his playing days.

"Cartagena has treated me phenomenally, I'm unwinding."

He added: "I'm very well and I'm grateful to Colombia for the affection I've been shown. I hope you respect me as well."

Maradona arrived in the city last Wednesday amid rumours he was to have liposuction but doctors denied he would have surgery on Tuesday.

"He's here in Cartagena on holiday, for a rest. He's been here a couple of times to check his arterial pressure," the director of the Medigel Clinic Francisco Holguin said.

"The possibility of operation has not been considered."

Maradona spent more than a week in the intensive care unit of a Buenos Aires hospital last April with heart and breathing problems. He was then confined to a psychiatric clinic by his family.

In September, Maradona returned to Cuba, where he has lived since 2000, to undergo more treatment for drug addiction but under a stricter regime than before.

At Christmas, Maradona defied his doctor's advice and returned to Argentina for one month. Last month, he also went to Greece on a business trip.



PHOTO: AFP

HE MIGHT BURST! Argentine football legend Diego Maradona waves to the press in Cartagena, Colombia on February 16.

SPORT



Football

AFP, London

Manchester United, battling a 790 million-pound takeover bid by US tycoon Malcolm Glazer, has retained its position as the world's wealthiest football club, a survey published Thursday showed.

The Deloitte Football Money League report for the 2003/04 season meanwhile showed that the world's richest 20 football clubs were set to break the 2.0-billion-pound income mark in 2005.

The survey, formerly known as the Deloitte Rich List, found that English Premiership giants Manchester United had an income of 171.5 million pounds (248 million euros, 324 million dollars) last season, giving it the top spot for the eighth year in a row.

United last week said it was unlikely to recommend to its shareholders Glazer's latest takeover offer worth 300 percent per share.

Spanish giants Real Madrid meanwhile rose two places to second in the

Deloitte survey, with income of 156.3 million pounds and AC Milan stayed third with 147.2 million.

Chelsea, bankrolled by Russian billionaire owner Roman Abramovich, climbed six spots to fourth after earning 143.7 million pounds.

Although the London club has a pretax loss of 88 million pounds last year, the Deloitte review does not include the cost of transfer fees or players' wages and instead concentrates solely on day to day income from football business.

"There are a number of different methods of defining a large club -- in terms of fanbase, attendances, TV audiences, or success on the pitch," Deloitte said.

"However, for the purposes of this publication, we look at the best publicly available measure of financial muscle -- income from day to day football business operations. We don't consider a club's budget for outgoings or what someone might pay to buy a club."

Publication of the report came on the day Borussia Dortmund, Germany's only publicly listed football club and one of Europe's best supported teams, said it was teetering on

the edge of financial collapse.

"The earnings and financial situation of Borussia Dortmund has become existence-threatening," the ailing club said in a statement.

Dortmund, currently in the lower half of Germany's premier football championship the Bundesliga, are the country's best supported club with average attendances this season of over 77,000 fans for home games.

That is almost ten thousand more people than go and watch Manchester United at its Old Trafford stadium.

A total of 10 British clubs meanwhile made up Deloitte's top 20, including Scottish giants Celtic (13) and Rangers (19).

Other English Premiership teams to feature were Arsenal (six), Liverpool (10), Newcastle (11), Tottenham Hotspur (14), Manchester City (16) and Aston Villa (20).

Deloitte said that Arsenal and Chelsea would challenge strongly for a top-three position in coming seasons, adding that British clubs differentiated themselves from their European peers through the revenue-earning capability of their stadium facilities.

"This has helped them to achieve a

more balanced spread of revenues compared to many clubs on the continent," said Paul Rawnsley, of Deloitte's Sports Business Group.

"Many of Europe's leading clubs have a great, and as yet relatively unexploited, opportunity to develop significant income streams from their stadia," he added.

Deloitte noted that Spanish and Italian clubs, in particular, were more dependent on income generated via broadcasting rights to show games exclusively live.

It added that top clubs were increasingly looking beyond the domestic and European markets to realise further increases in income.

Italy had five entries in the top 20, with AC Milan being joined by Juventus (5), Internazionale (8), AS Roma (12) and Lazio (15).

Making up the remainder of the top 20 were Barcelona (7), Bayern Munich (9), their German rivals Schalke 04 (17) and French outfit Olympique Marseille (18).

Real tracking Adriano?

INTERNET SOURCE, Paris

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez was spotted in deep conversation with Inter Milan supremo Massimo Moratti at Ronaldo's wedding celebration this week.

While both Perez and Moratti denied they spoke about the future of Inter star Adriano, the Brazil international is said to be growing increasingly frustrated at the San Siro.

Marca says Adriano is seriously considering asking for a transfer from Inter at the end of the season after becoming upset over the tactics of coach Roberto Mancini.

Real insiders insist Perez will only move for the striker should he make official his desire to leave Inter leading up to the close-season transfer window.



Football

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United skipper Roy Keane has hit out at 'diving' in the Premiership and insists it's a problem which is getting worse.

The 33-year-old Republic of Ireland international is becoming increasingly irritated by the number of players collapsing to the ground under no, or minimal, contact.

He was a victim himself at Highbury earlier this month when he pulled out of a penalty-box tackle on Ashley Cole, only for the England defender to go down anyway, an incident that left Keane bemused.

"I wasn't quite sure what he was up to," Keane told the official Manchester United magazine.

"If I had known, I might have reacted differently. Before the game there was all this stuff about anti-

racism and anti-bullying. It would be a good idea to start wearing wristbands for anti-diving.

"It's not just about foreign players because Ashley Cole is English but it's something that has crept into the Premiership.

"Players are going down far too easily and it seems to be getting worse."

Keane also knows he is likely to face a greater degree of gamesmanship in next Wednesday's Champions League clash with AC Milan at Old Trafford.

Having famously missed the 1999 final victory over Bayern Munich through suspension, Keane is running out of time to earn a 'legitimate' winner's medal from European football's most prestigious club competition.

The statistics suggest Keane may have had more success if he had accepted one of the many offers to move to La Liga or Serie A down the years.

As it is, he appears certain to see out his days at Old Trafford, either at the end of his current contract in 2006 or a year afterwards.

And while the pre-eminent midfielder of his generation would have enjoyed the challenge of life abroad, staying with United is not something which gives him cause for regret.

"It wasn't about the money," he said.

"United had been very good to me in that respect. It was more a question of testing myself.

"I had a dilemma at the time. I had been at United six or seven years, done fairly well in the team and I was quite happy at the time.

"It wasn't just the football but the way of life that appealed. But my children were another consideration. I don't ever regret staying, although I do like watching Italian and Spanish football."

Ajax, Germans happier



AFP, Paris

Dutch giants Ajax deservedly beat French side Auxerre 1-0 but their win was marred by a racist banner that greeted the visitors' Ivory Coast striker Bonaventure Kalou on Wednesday in their UEFA Cup third round first leg clash.

Kalou, who used to play for Ajax's bitter rivals Feyenoord, ran out onto the pitch to see a banner saying 'Kalou is invited to a banana tree' which showed that football's current campaign against racism has some way to go to win its battle.

Feyenoord themselves will be relatively happy to have come away with just a 2-1 defeat away at Sporting Lisbon, though the hosts played the last 25 minutes with 10 men after Portuguese midfielder Custodio was sent off for a second bookable offence. Elsewhere German sides enjoyed a relatively successful evening as both VfB Stuttgart and Schalke 04 clinched away draws.

Stuttgart drew 0-0 with two-time UEFA Cup champions Parma while Schalke 04 drew 1-1 with Shakhtar Donetsk, the German side's Brazilian marksman Ailton scoring their goal before allowing the hosts get a late equaliser.

Former Parma coach Alberto Malesani was hired as Greek champions Panathinaikos coach

on Wednesday but will not officially take charge of his first match till Saturday.

However, the Italian coach - who won the 1999 UEFA Cup with Parma - will have been encouraged to see his new team record a 1-0 victory over highflying Spanish side Sevilla.

Sevilla's Spanish rivals, Valencia, gave embattled coach Claudio Ranieri some relief as they won 2-0 at home to Romanian outfit Steaua Bucharest with goals from Ranieri's Italian compatriot Marco di Vaio and Argentinian ace Pablo Aimar.

Brazilian midfielder Maxwell was the Ajax hero as he gave the Dutch side a slender lead over the French side coached by the doyen of European managers Guy Roux.

The silver-booted Maxwell struck with a beautifully worked goal in the 36th minute in a match where the hosts dominated and will feel hard done by in only taking a single goal advantage to France next week for the second leg.

Maxwell ran deep into the Auxerre half before passing it to Dutch international Rafael van der Vaart whose superb backheel found the Brazilian in the box and he lashed it past Fabien Cool.

Ajax substitute Daniel de Ridder went closest to extending their lead in the late stages of the second-half as escaping his marker he met the ball on the volley but Cool produced a sharp

reflex save to turn it away for a corner.

Roux, 66, said that while he was pleased they had kept the tie alive he saw a clear difference between the two sides.

"A lot of the players lack top level international experience and it was clear tonight," said Roux, who has guided Auxerre to two league and Cup doubles.

Ajax coach Ronald Koeman was pleased with the result but was less happy to have lost another first choice player for a long time, South African midfielder Steven Pienaar who picked up a knee injury.

"That is another key player we have lost," said the former Dutch footballing great.

"The second leg should be more open because they will have to go on the offensive and that will create more space for us ... so we must take advantage of that."

With one eye on their domestic battle against relegation, Parma left several key players out of their starting line-up, including star striker Alberto Gilardino, scorer of 12 league goals this season.

Stuttgart, flying high in fifth place in the Bundesliga and coached by former Inter Milan midfielder Matthias Sammer, went closest to scoring when Brazilian striker Cacau's goalbound shot was scrambled off the line by veteran defender Giuseppe Cardone.

"I believe it shows the management still have faith in me, and anyway I would not have wanted

to leave. If the club had told me about this offer I would have told them I didn't want to go. It's as simple as that.

"I don't think the Newcastle fans have seen the best of me yet. Now is my chance."

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

AFP, Paris

Collated UEFA Cup third round first leg results on Wednesday:

- At Lisbon**
Sporting Lisbon (POR) 2 (Rogério 22, Liedson 37) Feyenoord (NED) 1 (Goor 7)
- At Valencia**
Valencia (ESP) 2 (Di Vaio 38, Aimar 55) Steaua Bucharest (ROM) 0
- At Parma**
Parma (ITA) 0 VfB Stuttgart (GER) 0
- At Amsterdam**
Ajax (NED) 1 (Maxwell 36) Auxerre (FRA) 0
- At Athens**
Panathinaikos (GRE) 1 (Vintra 76) FC Sevilla (ESP) 0
- At Belgrade**
Partizan Belgrade (SEM) 2 (Odita 12, 45) Dnipropetrovsk (UKR) 2 (Nazarenko 28, Ruso 57)
- At Donetsk**
Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 1 (Brandao 86) Schalke 04 (GER) 1 (Ailton 7)
- At Vienna**
Austria Vienna (AUT) v Athletic Bilbao (ESP) - postponed due to snow

Kluivert vows to bounce back

AFP, Newcastle

Dutch international striker Patrick Kluivert has vowed to repay the faith shown in him by Newcastle boss Graeme Souness by resurrecting his career with the English Premiership side.

The 28-year-old has scored just eight times in all competitions - including just four in 17 Premiership appearances - since arriving on a free transfer from Barcelona last summer.

But Souness revealed earlier in the week that he has such faith in him that he turned down an offer from Spanish side Osasuna during January's transfer window.

And Kluivert said he was determined to repay that vote of confidence.

"I didn't start something six months ago just to leave halfway through. Whatever anyone says or writes, I don't plan on going anywhere in the summer," Kluivert told the Daily Mirror ahead of Thursday's UEFA Cup match away at Dutch side Heerenveen.

Dortmund in the red



Football

AFP, Berlin

Six-time German champions Borussia Dortmund, the only Bundesliga club floated on the stock market, are on the brink of financial ruin it was confirmed on Thursday.

Dortmund were forced to release a press statement revealing that "the financial difficulties of the club had become so serious that they threaten the existence of Borussia Dortmund."

A loss of 27.2 million euros for the first half of the business year has raised fears of liquidation with share prices falling 25 percent on Thursday leaving them at under two euros apiece.

At the end of 2000 share prices were at 11 euros but have now crashed to 1.98 euros.

If financial cut-backs are not made Dortmund are expected to make a loss of 68.8 million euros for the financial year.

Dortmund said it had failed to find an investor for its Westfalen Stadium, which holds over 80,000 fans, that was sold in a complicated sale-and-lease deal.

Ronaldo injures toe at engagement bash!



Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid striker Ronaldo is doubtful for Saturday's league match against Athletic Bilbao after returning from his lavish Valentine's Day engagement party in Paris with an injury to his toe.

Club medical staff said that the Brazilian was suffering from inflammation of the big toe on his left foot and would undergo physiotherapy to deal with the problem.

Ronaldo turned up late for training on Tuesday after being delayed on his return from the celebrations at a secluded chateau near Paris and also missed the first 15 minutes of the session on Wednesday.

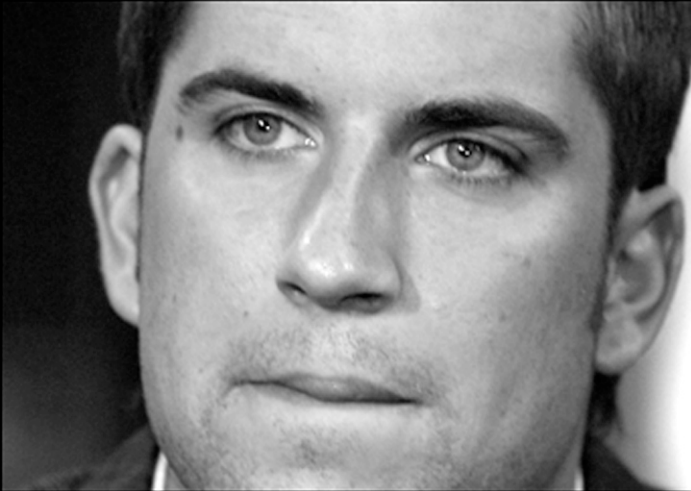
Sports daily Marca said that the 28-year-old would be fined by the club because of his late arrival.

Ronaldo turned up on time on Thursday, but pulled up after a few minutes and it now looks unlikely that he will play against Bilbao.

England striker Michael Owen will take his place in the starting line-up if he fails to recover in time.

Owen's England team mate David Beckham and captain Raul, who both complained of some minor muscle pain after playing in the tsunami benefit match at the Nou Camp, trained normally on Thursday.

Real play Serie A leaders Juventus at the Bernabeu next Tuesday in the first leg of their Champions League knockout tie.



ROBERT HOYZER



RONALDO